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ABSTRACT

Using the concept of triangles as a schematic conceptualization of service learning is a useful pedagogical tool in helping faculty, students, and community members to see the linkages among the component concepts in service learning approaches. Service learning, which is the linking of academic instruction with community service as guided by reflection, has the following among its general characteristics: (1) it brings education back into society by linking what students learn in the classroom to what goes on in the real world; (2) it encourages students to be useful and productive in the service of others; and (3) it provides students with the means to develop critical analytic and personal skills related to their own self-awareness and self-confidence. In the triangle of concepts, experience, reflection, and knowledge are mutually dependent and interconnected. In the triangle of partners, agencies, students, and faculty work together through reciprocal participation. Finally, in the triangle of relationship, the experience of agencies, the reflection of students, and the knowledge of faculty create mutually reciprocal and interactive relationships among that partners that create successful service learning programs. (Contains 23 references.) (MO)

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Service Learning Triangle: Key Concepts, Partners, Relationships

Florence E. McCarthy[1]

Introduction

While the literature abounds with descriptions and definitions of service learning and its various aspects[2], there are fewer articles that deal with its schematic conceptualization.[3] In the work I have been doing assisting universities and colleges in Asia and Australia in developing service learning curricula, I have found the use of triangles a useful pedagogical tool in helping faculty, students and community people "see" how they are interconnected in service learning endeavors. Additionally, a triangle is a useful way of illustrating the linkages among the component concepts in service learning approaches. The purpose of this brief paper is to analyze the interconnections among the partners and principals of service learning, and illustrate these connections through the use of triangles.

When I speak of service learning, I am referring, most simply, to "linking academic instruction with community service, guided by reflection." This is a basic definition, and among its general characteristics, service learning is

- A way of bringing education back into society, of linking what students learn in the classroom to what goes on in the real world,
- It is a way of encouraging students to be useful and productive in the service of others, and
- It provides students with the means of developing critical analytic skills as well as personal skills related to their own self-awareness and self-confidence, and to interacting with others who are unlike themselves.

Academic instruction implies service learning is part of the academic curriculum of a university or college, and is credit-bearing. Fulfilling the requirements of a service learning class means students earn academic credit toward their degrees. Academic credit for service learning also signifies administrative and faculty

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[2] See for example Battistoni 1995; Couto, 1996; Eyler and Giles 1999; Hesser 1995; Jacoby 1996; Markus, Howard and King 1993; Minz and Hesser 1996; Parker-Gwin 1996; Rama, Ravenscroft, Wolcott and Zlotkowski 2000; Rice and Brown 1998; Waldstein and Reiher 2001; Zlotkowski 1996. There is a rich and extensive literature in addition to these noted.

[3] Exceptions are the work of scholars such as Cone and Harris (1996) who deal with a theoretical framework for service learning, and Kolb (1984) who diagrams the stages of experiential learning as forming a circular process with each stage leading on to the next and eventually returning to the beginning again.

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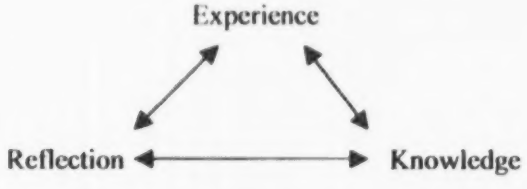
support and is one indication of the institutionalisation of service learning as part of the institutional infrastructure.

Community service suggests that the focus of service learning is service to others by participating in the ongoing activities and programs of local agencies whether they be service delivery such as providing elder care, undertaking environmental projects or tending orphans; linked to education such as after-school mentoring programs, language instruction, teen or youth programs, or as part of local government offices such as park management, city beautification projects, garbage collection, city planning and so on.

Guided by reflection is the unique component of service. It means service learning is not just volunteer work, nor is it just another academic class. Rather, the elements of reflection means that service learning has built into it processes of awareness-building and studied analysis and thinking about the experiences students have during their service. Moreover, reflection can be a guide in helping students move behind the dynamics of observable events and circumstances to gain greater awareness of the processes and interests creating the circumstances with which they are dealing.

The Triangle of Concepts

Defining the basic components of service learning, *experience*, *reflection*, and *knowledge* as mutually interdependent and reciprocal establishes the linkages important in the pedagogical approach of service learning. Diagramming these components in an isosceles triangle illustrates the mutual relationships that exist among these basic components. This is illustrated below.



The triangle suggests the mutual dependence and interconnection among each component. For example, we can think of experience being linked to knowledge. We do things that comprise our experience, and these can be the source of knowledge. However, as we know, unless we actively reflect on our experiences we don't necessarily learn from them. Knowledge is not an automatic consequence of experience: it requires thought combined with action to produce knowledge. Knowledge, on the other hand, can be learning, like in the classroom, but without active use or application, it often just remains knowledge in an abstract form. To be useful we know that knowledge needs to be both thought about and applied. Having knowledge is not a guarantee to being wise.

In successful service learning programs, each of the basic components has a critical role to play. **Experience** is the consequence of student involvement with community agencies. It is the composite of positive and negative activities, events, issues, and occurrences, social relationships and give and take that occurs during the service learning placement, the undertaking of assignments, and during reflective class discussions.

Knowledge is what students create during their placements and what they bring to their service learning placements, It is both what they already know and what they learn through the processes of being in a service learning experience, and doing what is required of them by agency staff and their teachers.

Reflection is the critical piece that requires of students that they actively engage with what's been happening, that is the action that has taken place (experience), and their evaluation of what they have learned from what they have done (reflection), and what they have created as knowledge in the process of being involved with a community agency. Reflection helps put experience in context. It helps make connections between what one does and what one knows, and it brings the student into the circle as an active participant in his or her own learning.

The Triangle of Partners

Successful service learning programs involves reciprocal participation by its central partners. If we diagram the primary participants in service learning in the form of a triangle, the critical nature of their presence is clear. If any one of the partners were removed, the triangle would collapse. In its place would be different forms of connections, such as between students and agencies that are reminiscent of volunteer programs, or between students and faculty that represent the usual classroom situation.

For **students**, participating in service learning gives them an alternative to the usual classroom instruction. It takes them into the wider community where they get a chance to be useful, to be productive in the assistance of others, and to discover new dimensions of their own abilities and about the characteristics of other people. All of these elements may be new experiences for young adults. In exchange for these experiences, students are given responsibilities and are treated

as mature, young, entry-level staff, with expectations and requirements based on the needs of others, not on themselves.

For **faculty**, creating a service learning subject requires that many teachers redesign their entire class, including their method of instruction. Decisions have to be made about how the main theories and concepts found in the curriculum for the class will be applied in the agency activities the students will undertake. New balance may have to be created between the amount of lecturing a teacher does, and being flexible in using the questions and inquiries of students as opportunities for flexible instruction, that is, moving outside the structured lesson to deal with teachable moments as they arise. How to consistently use the experiences of students as a vehicle for conveying the meaning of class content? This is difficult to do as the faculty can't predict what agency activities the students will undertake, nor can faculty guarantee that what is scheduled to happen during students' time at the agency actually occurs.

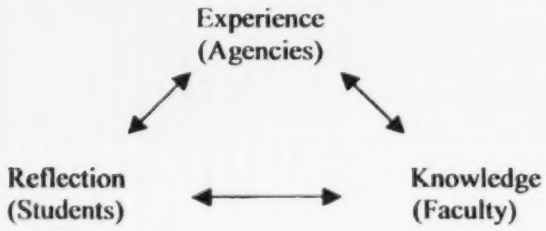
Faculty often need to rethink student assessment. How will students be asked to demonstrate their learning in the context of their placements? What kinds of assignments can be created that encourage students to explore their own agency settings for examples and applications of class content? How to encourage students to make connections among experience, forms of knowledge and their own interpretations? How to document personal development, and to evaluate improved analytical and critical thinking abilities?

Community Agencies also benefit from the engagement with students and faculties. Agency staff usually welcome the involvement of young people in their activities. These staff are providing an often unrecognized service in undertaking to mentor and supervise young adults and their activities. Invariably community agencies have more work than they can manage, and having extra assistance on a regular basis makes a big difference to them. In exchange for guiding the inputs of students, agencies have the benefit of the enthusiasm and fresh ideas of energetic young people. Students are usually excited and anxious to please. They are willing to help in any way they can, but often require direction, understanding and guidance. The beneficiaries or service-users of community agencies also often find students supportive and helpful. They too enjoy the energy and enthusiasm with which students approach their work, and service users often find that students can help with tasks that full-time staff are too busy to do. One positive effect of such student-community agency connections is the improved image of young people in the community, and a greater appreciation among students of their communities and the people who live in them.

The Triangle of Relationships

The need for mutually reciprocal and interactive relationships among the partners in service learning is required in order that its basic components are fully realized. Unless the partners work well together, it is difficult for the full value of service

learning to be created and maintained. These forms of interdependence can be seen in overlapping triangles that link the components of service learning with the partners involved.



The fact that the triangles overlap indicates the critical nature of the interdependencies that are required if service learning is to be successful. These interdependencies exist in the arena of contextualized knowledge creation, based on experiences, and reflective, engaged learning. These interdependencies exist as well in the connections among university or college faculty, community agency staff and community members, and students (McCarthy 2002a). Each category of person is essential to the overall success of service learning, an undertaking, which if done correctly, is a win-win situation for all participants.

"Correct" service learning speaks not to a single model or one correct way of being implemented. Actually, the best service learning curricula are built from the existing strengths and projects of institutions (McCarthy 2002b). Rather "correct" service learning undertakings indicates the fundamental need that each participant is recognized for the contributions they make and each is welcomed as a full partner in the development of agreements that speak to the needs and interests of all concerned. Successful service learning projects embody what bell hooks calls "authentic help" (1994), where those providing help do not assume domination or superiority over those being helped. With the unequal power and resources often inherent among academic institutions, community agencies, and students, it is indeed the challenge of service learning to create meaningful and reciprocal forms of partnerships among all participants.

It is necessary to mention as well that this schematic devise of overlapping triangles is not intended as a deterministic model, for example that experience only happens in the agencies. Indeed the fact that the experience of an altered classroom in which there is more flexible exchange among students, and among students and teachers is a stimulating and rewarding experience for students. As the literature suggests, students participating in service learning are likely to improve academically (Sax and Astin 1997; Fredericksen 2000) and take a more engaged form of learning into other classrooms. (Eyler and Giles 1999), and to use the skills of critical thinking and analysis in other arenas as well (Roschelle et al. 2000; O'Hara 2001). It is also the case that involvement in service learning is a means for institutions of higher education to reconnect to their surrounding

communities and combat a widespread feeling amongst the general public that colleges and universities have no connection to the everyday lives of people (Gamson 1997; Hollander and Saltmarsh, 2000).

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